



Gov. Martinez announces \$78 million funding for U.S. Route 491



Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly and New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez announced the \$78 million in funding for completion of the four-lane construction on U.S. Route 491 on March 25. Under construction since the 1980s, U.S. 491 has 21.8 miles left to be constructed, from Naschitti to Twin Lakes. The project will be funded by performance bonds sold by New Mexico Department of Transportation. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

SHEEP SPRINGS, N.M. — It was a celebration.

Although there was no groundbreaking, no ribbon cutting or any other ceremony indicative of celebration, the announcement by New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez that four-lane highway construction for the completion of U.S. Route 491 improvements would be funded was enough cause for celebration.

On the Tuesday afternoon, a crowd of 50-plus people gathered alongside U.S. Route 491 while commercial trucks

and other vehicles sped by. A makeshift stage on a tractor-trailer bed faced an audience seated on folding chairs.

Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly was the first to speak and he began by giving recognition to Sen. John Pinto.

"I'd first like to start by recognizing the hard work and dedication of a man that made the four-lane construction of U.S. Route 491 a priority in his service to the State and the Navajo Nation: Senator John Pinto," President Shelly said.

He said Sen. Pinto got the

ball rolling for the four-lane construction on U.S. Route 491, which was formerly named U.S. 666 and called the "Devil's Highway" because of the large number of fatalities on the road.

President Shelly also thanked Gov. Martinez for her commitment to working with the Navajo people, which he said was "unquestionable." He presented a letter of appreciation for her recent approval of capital outlay funding to the Navajo Nation.

He recalled how the importance of U.S. Route 491

was underscored back on July 5, 2013, when a portion of the road between Naschitti and Sheep Springs was closed after heavy flooding damaged a portion of the roadway.

"The rest of the country quickly realized how vital this road is to travel in the Four Corners region," he said.

Sen. Pinto spoke next and was assisted to the podium by Gov. Martinez.

He gave thanks for those in attendance and recalled how he and others began advocating for widening the roadway more

than 20 years ago. Funding was a constant concern.

"There were years when the money could have been taken away from us for other use. After asking for money year after year for almost 20 years, we are here today," Sen. Pinto said.

He expressed sadness for those that lost their lives on the highway and said completing the four-lane construction would put an end to the destruction and make the road safe for Navajo families and all visitors.

Sen. Pinto said, "This is an important highway. It brings all of the Navajo people together. We all drive great distances to keep connected with families and work."

Tom Church, cabinet secretary and director of New Mexico Department of Transportation, said he has worked for the highway department for more than 21 years.

"During my entire career, we have talked and promised that this highway improvement to the people of northwest New Mexico would be completed and I am proud today that Gov. Susana Martinez will keep that promise," Church said.

The funds were generated from the sale of bonds with a triple-A rating, he explained.

"Three years ago, the state transportation department could not have done this project. We were operating at about \$100 million in the red," Church said. "It's been the sound financial and fiscal policies the governor and transportation that really turned the department around.

"Now, we're operating \$100 million in the black," he added.

Gov. Martinez agreed with Church and gave him praise for his leadership in turning the department around.

She credited him with being smart about the money that taxpayers pay to the state government and making it stretch, making the best of it and being able to complete a project as big as U.S. 491.

"Today, we're here to talk about an important project that will of course make U.S. 491 more safe and accessible," Gov. Martinez said. "This road is an essential highway for commerce and tourism in the area, with local families and businesses depending on it on a daily basis."

In 1982, the state widened 21 miles of the two-lane road into a four-lane highway, which saw an immediate decrease in the accident severity and fatality rates on that stretch of road.

The remaining two-lane road from Shiprock to Gallup on Highway 666 was listed in the top 10 most dangerous highways in the U.S. and had a fatality rate six times higher than the rest of the state. Sixty percent of those fatalities were alcohol related.

"In 2003, the highway designation was changed to 491 and that same year, the legislature approved more funding for more areas of the corridor to be reconstructed," Gov. Martinez said.

She noted that 21.8 miles remain to be constructed at a cost of \$78 million.

"The New Mexico DOT recently issued \$80 million in new money revenue bonds to fund certain eligible highway projects, including U.S. Route 491," Gov. Martinez said. "Today, I am pleased to announce that much of that money will be spent to improve this road and safety of those who travel upon it.

"The proposed improvements to this corridor will improve safety, efficiency and drive economic development along the highway in surrounding communities," she added.

Major improvements include two additional lanes to increase capacity, a median separating northbound and southbound lanes, plus development of acceleration and deceleration lanes in congested and high traffic areas.

"I am proud of all the hard work that has gone into this vital project," she said.



President Shelly first acknowledged the dedicated efforts of Sen. John Pinto in his unending quest to have U.S. Route 491's four-lane construction completed. He recounted reporting before the New Mexico Transportation Commission in 2007, along with Sen. Pinto, to request funding for the highway. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Sen. John Pinto said he spent the past 20 years lobbying and advocating for the four-lane construction of U.S. Route 491. He expressed sadness for the many lives lost on the roadway and said with the completion of construction, that perhaps now the destruction will end. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



With over 21 years experience in the state transportation department, N.M. Department of Transportation Cabinet Secretary Tom Church said during his entire career, he's heard the state promise that construction of the roadway in northwestern New Mexico would be completed. He was proud to announce Gov. Martinez's decision to finish the road. (Photo by Rick Abasta)